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BOOK REVIEW

Following Nature's Lead: Ancient Ways of Living in a Dying World, by M.D. Usher, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025, 233 pp., \$27.95 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-691-24920-9, \$15.37 (Kindle), ISBN: 978-0-691-24961-2.

The author opens this ambitious work with a resonant question: what value can the study of classical literature, history, and philosophy contribute to the modern world's ecological and economic challenges? Far more than a mere historical account, this book introduces a novel theoretical framework that draws from ancient wisdom to offer both diagnostic and prescriptive approaches to confronting the contemporary climate crisis. Usher presents his work not as a traditional academic book, but rather as a collection of "sermons" that take ancient texts as their starting point to offer an edifying contemporary message (pp. xi-xii).

By deconstructing conventional theoretical frameworks, Usher examines the humanity-nature relationship through a sophisticated systemic approach, interweaving classical philosophy, complexity science, and environmental ethics. The author highlights the necessary transition from unlimited economic growth to a model that follows nature's example, arguing that this transformation represents a "real change" in our understanding of sustainability that requires new analytical tools. This approach aligns with Leskanich's [1] emphasis on the importance of "sensitivity" defined as "detecting and reacting rapidly to small changes, influences, signals" (pp. 1-6).

The author first traces the evolution of environmental thought from antiquity and justifies the need for effective integrated analysis. Drawing on established theories, notably those of Lucretius, Plato, Heraclitus, Aristotle, and Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, Usher constructs a five-component conceptual framework comprising understanding of nature (logos), application of ecological principles (oikos), systemic integration (cosmos), personal transformation (ethos), and collective action (praxis)—all interconnected elements that provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how to "follow nature's lead" (pp. 45-85). This approach complements Garson's [2] analysis of ecological sustainability and builds on Leskanich's [1] work on environmental sensitivity, while developing a unique perspective that integrates Western philosophical tradition with contemporary environmental challenges. The framework's systemic thinking approach resonates with Meadows' [3] work on understanding complex systems and their leverage points for transformation.

The book's methodological approach combines historical analysis with an innovative multi-criteria assessment framework, dividing the transformation process into philosophical stages (conceptual development) and practical stages (concrete application). This dual structure allows the author to identify approximately 17 conceptual tipping points and 12 practical applications that have characterized the evolution of Western ecological thought (pp. 87-123), providing a nuanced understanding of how decisions on environmental matters are formed and implemented. This approach addresses gaps identified by Naess [4], who highlighted the fragmented nature of ecological governance institutions and the need for a "deep ecology" that recognizes organisms as "knots in a biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations." The methodology also incorporates insights from Indigenous research approaches, recognizing the importance of place-based, relational accountability as emphasized by Wilson [5] in his work on Indigenous research methods.

The first chapter, "What Chemistry!", exhaustively examines the global climate change situation, exploring both natural causes (volcanic activity, solar output, Earth's orbit) and anthropogenic factors (transportation, industrialization, deforestation). The author's detailed analysis of scientific evidence through Lucretius and Epicurean philosophy demonstrates a profound understanding of the physical foundations of climate action. Usher particularly develops the Epicurean concept of the "tetrapharmakos" (four-fold remedy): "God is nothing to be feared; death presents no worries; what is good is easy to obtain, and hardship easy to endure" (pp. 14-44). The author's perspective extends Bennett's [6] examination of vibrant materialism, offering a more optimistic vision than contemporary critics of climate inaction, notably by showing how ancient atomism prefigures modern laws of energy and matter conservation.

In the second chapter, "There Are Gods Here Too", Usher introduces a sophisticated multi-criteria assessment framework for understanding the relationship between human beings and nature, drawing particularly on Aristotle's teachings concerning Umwelt (perceptual environment), Heraclitus's discoveries about logos (universal reason), and the Stoic tradition of Hierocles' circles of concern. This categorization highlights the power dynamics and competing interests that shape our relationships with the natural environment, addressing methodological gaps identified by Cronon [7] in the analysis of human-nature relations. The author particularly develops Heraclitus' idea that "there are gods here too," showing how domestic fire shares the same essence as the cosmic fire that animates the universe (pp. 45-86).

The third chapter presents perhaps the book's most innovative contribution: "Cosmos Out of Chaos", a two-stage analysis of natural resilience and systemic transformation. Usher traces philosophical stages through Thoreau and his experience at Walden Pond, Diogenes' Cynic philosophy, and Seneca's Stoic wisdom, while parallel practical phases shape the underlying conditions of ecological adaptation. The author particularly develops Thoreau's observation that "the coming in of spring is

like the creation of Cosmos out of Chaos," showing how this poetic vision actually contains a profound philosophy of life inspired by nature's capacity for resilience. This analytical framework offers a powerful tool for understanding how complex decisions emerge from multiple, overlapping processes, building on Schliephake's [8] emphasis on the need for adaptive governance systems in the Anthropocene era. Usher's analysis of the "Seneca Curve"—the phenomenon whereby growth is slow but collapse is rapid—draws directly from Bardi's [9] seminal work on this concept, demonstrating how ancient Stoic wisdom anticipated modern understanding of systemic collapse and renewal (pp. 87-123).

The fourth chapter, "There Is No Wealth But Life", dissects ecological economics, examining its principles through the revolutionary contributions of John Ruskin (1819-1900) and Georges Bataille (1897-1962). The author's analysis reveals how a sustainable economy establishes substantial elements through equitable redistribution mechanisms, community cooperation arrangements, public education and awareness requirements, and alternative financial mechanisms based on "expenditure" rather than accumulation. Usher shows that Ruskin, though mainly known as an art historian and critic, was actually a precursor of ecological economics with his revolutionary concept that "there is no wealth but life." Bataille, for his part, develops a "theory of general economy" that follows nature's example where excess energy must be spent productively rather than accumulated destructively (pp. 124-170). This detailed examination provides crucial insights into the strengths and limitations of an economy that truly follows nature's lead.

The epilogue "Taking Stock" evaluates the post-transformation implementation process through a profound reflection on the human condition and our capacity to live in harmony with nature. The author's analysis of personal and collective change mechanisms reveals the critical importance of ancient wisdom in the future of environmental governance. Usher particularly develops the concept of environmental "bubbles," using Chardin's soap bubble metaphor to illustrate how our perceptual environments can both isolate us from and connect us to nature (pp. 171-177). Another view is that this metaphor concerns the transience of life.

The "Following Nature's Lead" framework represents the book's central theoretical contribution, characterized as "multidimensional," "interactive," "emergent," "iterative," "dynamic," and "synergistic" (p. 175). Unlike previous approaches that analyse environmental decision-making broadly, this framework specifically examines the politics of contemporary ecological negotiations, linking national and international politics in a unique way. The author presents this framework as a "3-axis model" with stages of exploration, interpretation, and practical application (p. 175), providing both analytical clarity and practical utility. This systems-thinking approach aligns with Meadows' [3] emphasis on understanding the paradigms and mental models that drive system behaviour.

The author concludes that ancient wisdom embodies a "real architecture" in global ecological decision-making, not merely a "mirage" or "facade" (pp. 171-177). This optimistic assessment is tempered by recognition of implementation challenges, particularly concerning the practical application of these ancient principles in a world dominated by technology and economic growth. The book's final message echoes the author's own words: "Climate change is a huge and dramatic event that requires collective thinking and collective action" (p. 13).

A particular strength of the book lies in its ability to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of ancient concepts. For example, the author shows how the Stoic concept of "preparation for catastrophes" (*premeditatio malorum*) offers valuable psychological tools for dealing with contemporary climate anxiety, particularly relevant in light of Bardi's [9] analysis of how civilizations experience rapid collapse after periods of gradual growth. Similarly, the Epicurean approach to "pleasure" as a middle way between excess and deficiency provides an alternative model to modern rampant consumption. The author also integrates references to contemporary developments, notably the PLAN (Planetary Limits Academic Network) and its ten foundational principles, showing how modern transdisciplinary research converges toward conclusions already reached by ancient philosophers concerning planetary limits (pp. 102-104).

Princeton University Press delivers an essential reference with this book. A comprehensive analysis of the evolution of ecological wisdom, this volume meticulously examines ancient philosophical frameworks, highlighting both the limitations of current approaches and opportunities for more effective implementation. Through its innovative "Following Nature's Lead" framework, it guides us to more coherent and sustainable environmental governance.

The book makes significant contributions to several fields: first, it establishes a crucial bridge between classical humanities and contemporary environmental studies; second, it provides a robust theoretical framework for applying ancient wisdom to modern challenges; third, it offers practical tools for personal and collective transformation; and fourth, it demonstrates the continued relevance of ancient philosophy for life today.

More than just an assessment of the status quo, this book provides both a solid theoretical foundation and practical tools for rethinking international environmental cooperation. For climate negotiators, scholars of international relations, environmental policy students, and climate policy practitioners, Usher's work illuminates the complex architecture of global climate governance. This approach complements Amarantidou's [10] philosophical guide for more sensible ways of living in the face of climate crisis, while adding a unique historical and practical dimension.

The author is speaking to "an ordinary person who's looking for a change of perspective that is at once personal and systemic, whose concern is both local and global" (p. xii). This should encourage all of us.

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